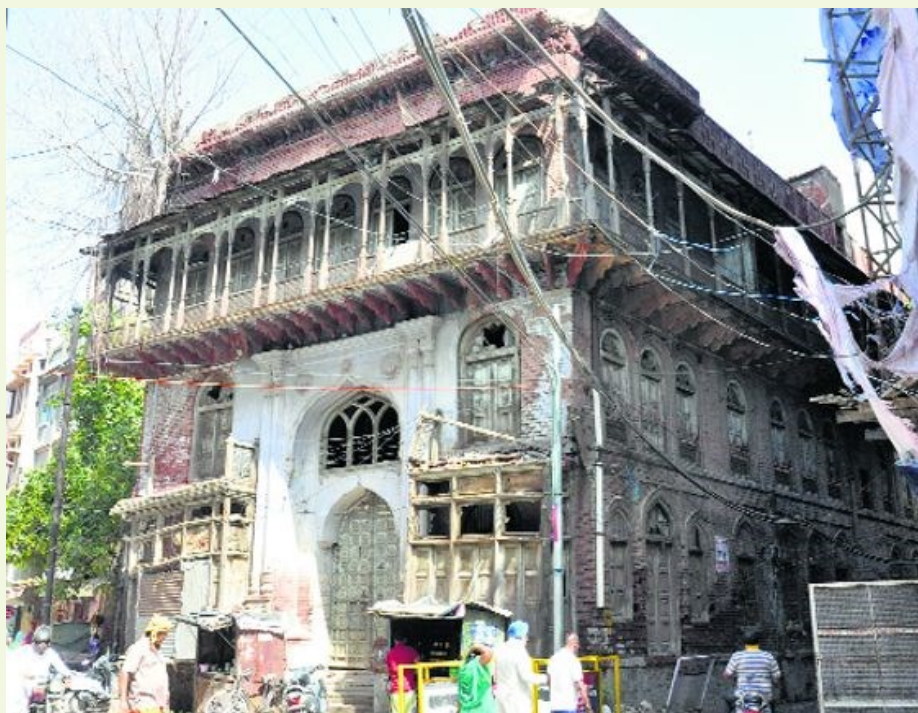
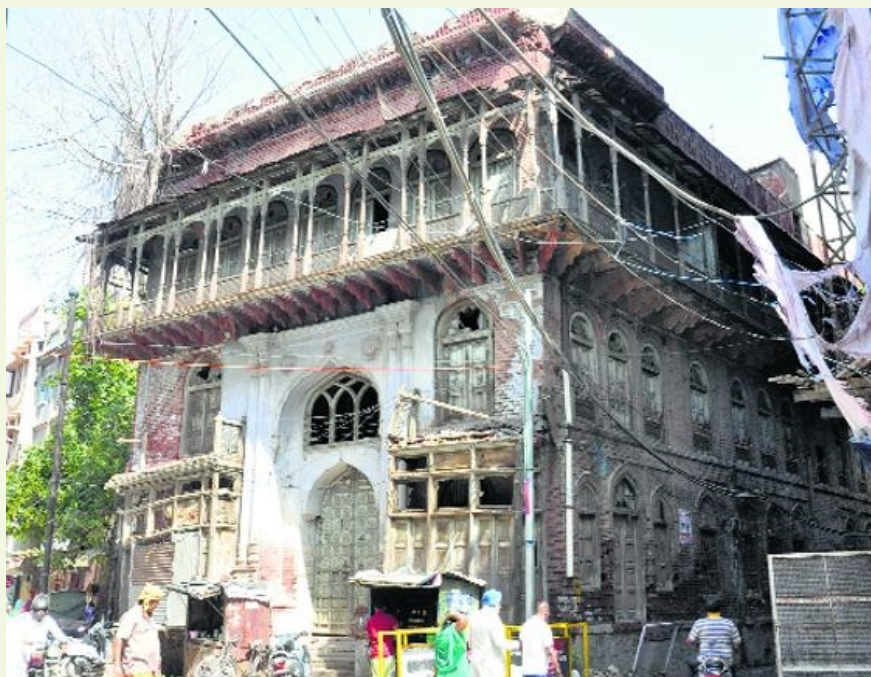


Amritsar's heritage forgotten



Tribune News Service



A locked decaying dharamshala. It seems not much has been thought about its conservation and restoration in the walled city.

Founded by Guru Ramdas in 1577, the holy city of Amritsar is known for its glorious past and exquisite architecture. Tribune correspondent Neeraj Bagga and lensman Sunil Kumar take a quick trip to the city to know the state of historic structures.

Amritsar is fast losing its old charm and architecture. The fast-paced modernisation has compelled people to move on to newer places, leaving behind the rich architectural heritage and historical buildings, which is mostly located in the walled city.

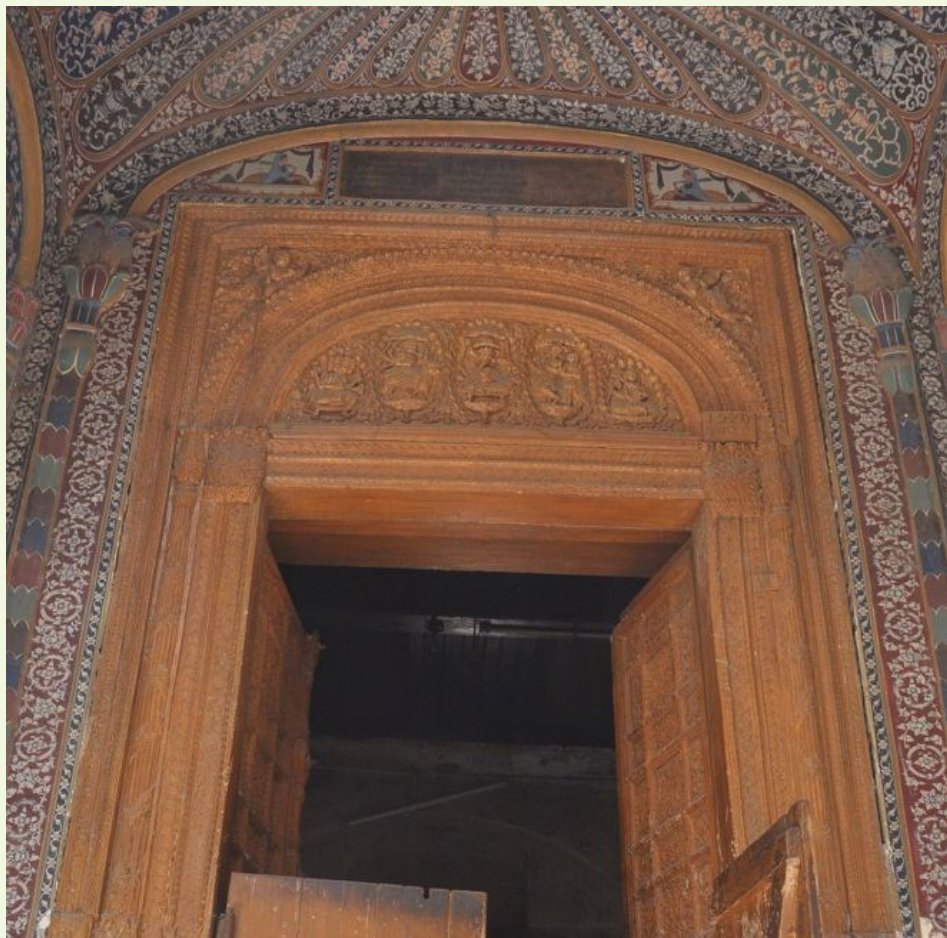




A view of the Thakurdwara Dariana Mal's façade.



Centuries-old Veer Bhan Da Shivala's frescoes.



Entrance of the Thakurdwara Dariana Mal.



The court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh painted on a wall of the sanctum sanctorum of Veer Bhan Da Shivala.

Situated in the vicinity of the Golden Temple, several old and dilapidated structures are on the verge of falling apart. It seems not much has been thought about their conservation and restoration. A locked decaying dharamshala stands testimony to this. Close to it is the damaged and abandoned building which used to house a branch of the Central Bank of India. Not far away from the Golden Temple Post Office, the structure still has a statue standing above its entrance greeting the visitors. Next to the structure is Ram Gali. It houses a massive old building, which is in a ramshackle condition, but ornate windows

and woodwork give onlookers a glimpse into the holy city's rich architectural past.



The sanctum sanctorum of Veer Bhan Da Shivala.



A dilapidated building at Ram Gali.



A gallery of the restored Qila Ahluwalia.



Arch-shaped entrance of the historic Qila Ahluwalia.

Established during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Veer Bhan Da Shivala stands testimony to that egalitarian reign; so much so that a view of his royal court was painted on a wall of the Shivala's sanctum sanctorum. However, in the absence of any efforts to preserve the rich legacy, frescoes of the Shivala have wreaked havoc on its wall paintings, which are fast fading away. More than half of the frescoes over a small temple inside the Shivala have been painted white in colour.

At Taksal Chowk, there are no remains of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's mint, but a beautifully raised structure of a temple. Thakurdwara Dariana Mal is another remarkable building which provides a peek into the glorious past to tourists. Its entrance is marked with intricate wooden carving which is difficult to find these days.



The facade of Qila Ahluwalia. A major portion of the facade had crumbled in the past.



A statue above the entrance of a building, which housed a branch of the Central Bank of India.



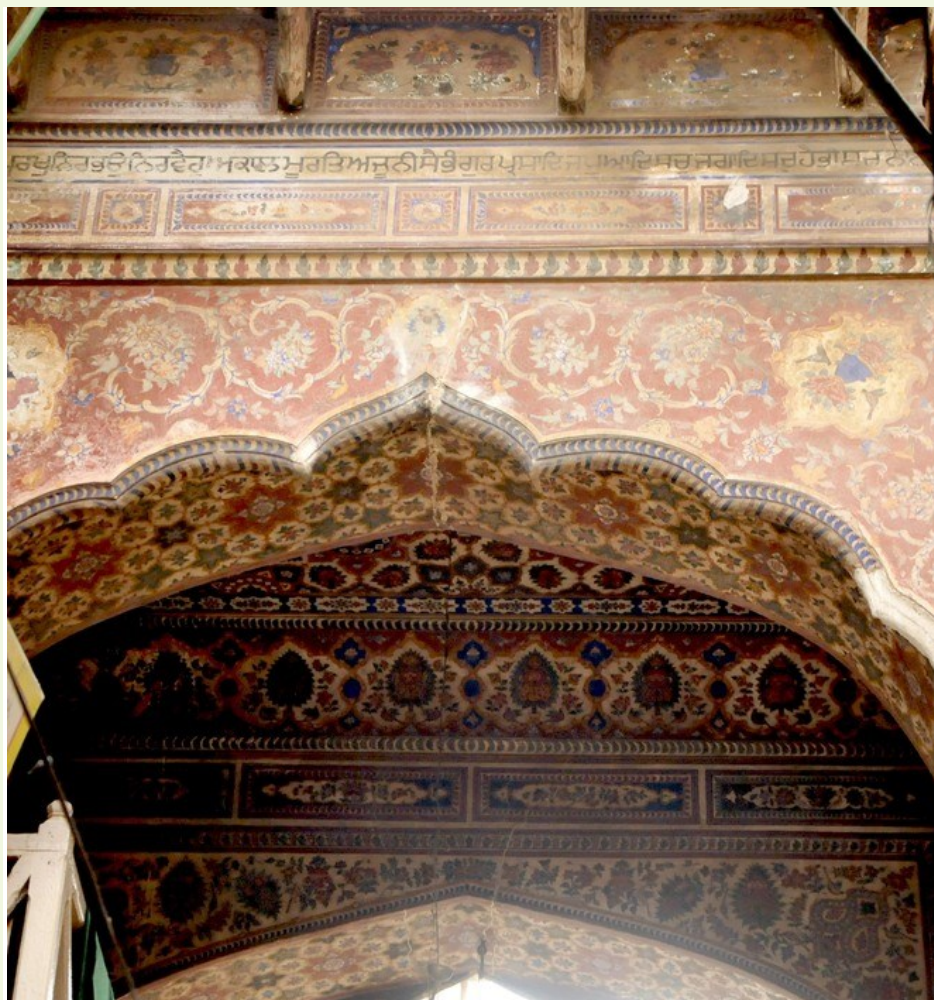
The restored Qila Ahluwalia. Concerted efforts have infused a new lease of life into its façade.



A temple which is said to house the taksal (mint) of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Qila Ahluwalia is a fine example of a restored heritage. Dating back to the Sikh Misl's period, it has been taken good care of by the government. Its historic wells, wood-covered ceiling in the staircase, arch-shaped entrance have been well preserved. Concerted efforts have infused a new lease of life into its façade, which stands out due to the extensive wood work.

Rich legacy of Amritsar going down
in ruins...lack of vision to blame?



Darshani Deodhi

The city has a number of historic buildings related to the Guru period (1469-1708), the Sikh Misl period (1716-1799), Khalsa Raj under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839) and the British era (1849-1947), but these heritage sites are crying for attention. Some monuments belong to Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the British era, which still exist in the city, but in a dilapidated condition. Some buildings have been recently renovated, but due to lack of heritage perspective and vision, the original architecture has been changed. Victoria Jubilee Hospital and Town Hall buildings are perfect examples of this, where a hotel and Food Street is being developed, respectively.

Chitra Cinema

Chitra Cinema is one of the oldest cinema halls in the state. The cinema was constructed by Mahna Singh Nagi (Ramgaria) in 1909. Mahna Singh was a native of Lullan village, near Jandiala Guru. Its construction was completed in 1915. Initially, the name of the cinema was Crown Cinema Sardar Mahna Singh Theatrical Hall. Residents used to call it Mahna Singh Da Mandua. Mandua is a Punjabi name for theatre. This over-a-century-old building, lying abandoned, attracts heritage lovers from all over. People want that it should be preserved.

Town Hall building

The British-era building, which was the Amritsar municipality office for years, is being converted into a food street now. A portion of the late 19th-century building was

given to the Partition Museum in 2015. The structure is being changed for the food street now.

Victoria Jubilee Hospital

The Punjab Government restored and revamped the abandoned 127-year-old colonial building of Victoria Jubilee Hospital, now Urban Hatt, in consultation with the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, to attract tourists to taste Amritsar's cuisine in 2016. But it was non-operational since restoration. Now, the building is being converted into a hotel by a private firm.

Ram Bagh Deorhi

The MC had renovated the 200-year-old Ram Bagh Deorhi of Maharaja Ranjit Singh under the National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) scheme in 2019. It was adjoining the Ram Bagh Gate, which was demolished during the British rule in 1860. As per the oral history, Maharaja Ranjit Singh used to sit here to hear grievances of people. The government converted it into a folk museum and exhibited local trade, cultural and folk instruments and goods, but the MC failed to make it functional. Despite being renovated, the building has started deteriorating again.

Summer Palace Deorhi

The around 200-year-old building of Maharaja Ranjit Singh-era, known as the entrance (deorhi), is situated on

the backside of the Summer Palace in Rambagh. A portion of the building collapsed in March this year. The historic deorhi is in a deplorable condition since long and crying for attention. Earlier, the deorhi was under possession of Service Club, but they handed it over to the MC a few years ago.

Summer Palace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The Summer Palace of legendary Sikh King Maharaja Ranjit Singh was built in 1819. It is under renovation for the past 13 years, but is still incomplete. The Maharaja used to stay here during his visit to the Golden Temple. It has been out of bounds for tourists for years owing to its prolonged conservation work. Started in 2007, the conservation work is still not over.

Centuries-old monuments remain neglected in city

The world has been observing the World Heritage Day for the last 36 years, but the state government, district administration and socio-religious organisations appear to have been least concerned over the heritage sites and monuments in the 442-year-old holy city.



A pathetic view outside one of the heritage sites in the holy city on Wednesday.

The world has been observing the World Heritage Day for the last 36 years, but the state government, district administration and socio-religious organisations appear to

have been least concerned over the heritage sites and monuments in the 442-year-old holy city.

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) often faces criticism for “not taking care” of the heritage of Guru period (1574-1708), Sikh Misl period (1716-1799) and Khalsa Raj under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1802-1839). Recently, a ‘deodhi’ at Tarn Taran Sahib was demolished. Kar sewa organisations have changed facades of several historic buildings inside the Golden Temple complex.

Much of the city’s structure, founded by Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru, has changed presently. The new building style has replaced the old one.

A large number of centuries-old buildings have been eliminated to construct hotels around the Golden Temple in the last decade. Conservation experts say, “The government has failed to make any policy to encourage heritage tourism as the city has a great potential for religious tourism. Old buildings can be preserved and used for hospitality.”

A large number of monuments belong to Maharaja Ranjit Singh and British era which still exist in the city, but in a pathetic condition. Some of the buildings have been recently renovated but several are still facing the mafia threat.

The 200-year-old wall, which was reconstructed by Britishers, has almost been encroached upon by vendors and traders. Permanent encroachments have covered the wall. “The government appears to be helpless to restore the wall as it doesn’t want to annoy their voters. The

preference of politicians is votes, not heritage,” says advocate Kuljit Singh.

The historical Ram Bagh, which is a protected monument by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI), is in a shambles. Most of the 84-acre garden has been occupied by private clubs, encroachers and individuals. The project to revive the Chahar Bagh of Ranjit Singh era has been hanging fire as a historical watch tower is in the possession of a private club.

Balwinder Singh, senior conservation expert, who has been making people aware of their heritage since 1992 after his study from the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, University of York, says, “The International Council on Monuments and Sites had initiated the World Heritage Day in 1982 with the aim of creating awareness among people about heritage sites. We should make the sangat aware to preserve the Sikh spiritual heritage sites. Kar sewa organisations have done a major damage to the Sikh heritage in the past. Creating awareness is the only solution.”